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Author(s): Susan Greenstein

Source: *College English*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (Jan., 1980), pp. 524-534

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375721>

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Dear Reader, Dear Friend: Richardson's Readers and the Social Response to Character

HERCULE POIROT IS DEAD: FAMED BELGIAN DETECTIVE
Headline, *The New York Times*, August 6, 1975

HERCULE POIROT'S OBITUARY made the front page of *The New York Times*; tongue in editorial cheek, the *Times* provided a playful and elegant notice of the publication of the final Hercule Poirot mystery. Neither the headline nor the wealth of detail in the article gave any indication that this was a jest, a put-on. Even the acknowledgment of M. Poirot's fictionality at the close of the second paragraph might have left some readers perplexed. Of course, we were all in the know. Poirot's "reality" was not to be taken seriously; he was Dame Agatha's creation.

Playful conceits involving fictional characters are plentiful. The sophisticate enjoys and dismisses them. It is only the "naïve reader," like Fielding's Partridge, who tries to warn Hamlet of the approach of the Ghost. Yet somewhere between these two extremes lies a range encompassing the experience of most readers of fiction which is still uncharted territory. We often experience characters in apparent isolation, as things-in-themselves which can be more compelling at first than all the other elements of a given fiction. Reader after reader, taken up with an Elizabeth Bennet, a Dorothea Brooke, or a Lambert Strether, responds with affection, eagerness to know more, anger on the character's behalf, or even, on occasion, "activities" such as the urgent marshalling of friendly advice. This manner of responding to characters as if they were real is also called "naive," and considered unworthy of scholarly attention.

But someone who finds Trollope's Mr. Harding fussy and woefully timid will read *The Warden* very differently from the reader who finds him a pleasant companion and a steadfast moral adventurer. Readers who wince every time Esther Summerson speaks are barred from reading *Bleak House* in certain ways. Such responses are more usefully termed "social" than "naive" and cannot be fully explained either by psychoanalytic theories of identification and the working out of individual fan-

Susan Greenstein is an assistant professor of English at Temple University. She has published essays on African literature and Henry James, and she is currently working on a study of novels of empire written by women who lived or travelled in Africa. A condensed version of this essay on the social response to character was read to the spring 1979 meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association.

tasies or by a theory of purely formal pleasures. Without tackling the thorny problem of whether a particular view of either character is a "misreading," it can be argued that the social response to fictional people, powerful in its consequences for interpretation, should be recognized as a legitimate part of the process of reading and incorporated into the critical act. Yet resistance to doing so persists, despite the recent burgeoning of studies in reader-oriented criticism, which would seem to provide both a theoretical context and an intellectual climate hospitable to raising questions about this very common reaction to mimetic art.

The resistance, I believe, stems from two important issues in addition to the stigma of naïveté. First, a great deal is at stake. There are reasons more compelling than the conventions of literary study to value the integrated experience of a text. To admit the "realness" of characters seems to threaten the integrity of the artifact, and by extension, the power of art to order (or deliberately subvert) our view of the world. Second, taking the characters as if they are real may often be central to the reading experience, but it is a borderline phenomenon for literary analysis. Do we approach it from the text and examine how realistic characters are created on the page, or do we turn to subjective criticism and investigate the psychology of the reader?¹

Yet similar problems have been surmounted with regard to other text-generated "personalities." Since Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* we have been prepared to acknowledge our "conversations" with Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and others, and to look carefully at how the text makes them possible. We have also been willing to investigate how the relation between reader and narrator or implied author contributes to the realization of characters.² We talk about our collusion with Austen, or how we are instructed by George Eliot. And it is understood that we must "like" or come to approve of the persona of the author in order to become fully engaged with the text. But our commerce with characters themselves on the same plane, that of everyday social encounters, still remains largely unavailable to critical examination. D. W. Harding, for instance, while explaining how the illusion of reality is created for some characters (by remarking on the similarities between the way we listen to gossip and the way we "listen to" a narrated tale), abandons this promising insight to warn against overlooking the "fictional contract":

Many readers, even educated readers . . . retain traces of the naive view of the *personae* as real people. . . . The more sophisticated reader knows that he is in social communication of a special sort with the author, and he bears in mind that the represented participants are only part of a convention by which the author discusses, and proposes an evaluation of, possible human experience.³

¹For the first approach see, for example, W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965) and Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 1-45 and *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). While the present study relies on what these and other theorists of mimesis have enabled us to understand about the creation of realistic characters and the reader's participation in the process, my intention is to explore the encounter with character in particular, and at the level on which the so-called "naïve" reader experiences it.

²In addition to *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), see John Bayley, "Character and Consciousness," *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 225-235 and Walter J. Slatoff, *With Respect to Readers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970).

³"Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2 (1962), 147.

Those who ignore this distinction have made a critical gaffe.

To select character from all the other elements of a tale for particular attention may seem both artificial and wrongheaded, at least of the critic, if not the reader. But no other "life-like" figure in the text attains a provisional status in the world of the reader similar to that accorded the characters. Contemporary studies of reading stress the reader's active participation in creating the fictional world he or she experiences, thereby providing a theoretic framework for those analyses of characterization which point out that characters are like people we meet, insofar as the information provided by the text, just like that of daily life, is always incomplete, and must be filled in and organized by the reader. Our "readings" of families, friends and acquaintances are filtered through many of the same categories used for fictional characters, and must contend with similar lacunae.⁴

On one level, therefore, our response to character is a social one. We construct our versions of characters out of the available data, as we do our ideas of real people, forming opinions about them as part of the process. Although the range of information we have to work with in each case does differ, there is considerable overlap. Most important, the portrait thus created, as well as the judgments and emotions it elicits, can be described by means of our ordinary social vocabulary. The work of such writers as Richardson or Jane Austen encourages precisely this practice. But when, for example, students new to literary discourse discuss characters as they would real people they liked or disliked, teachers become uncomfortable. We hasten to remind them of the narrator's point of view, of formal patterns, or of the "identity themes" which have predisposed them towards particular interpretations.⁵ New ways of reading are proffered, but at the same time it is made clear that those which came most readily to hand are inappropriate.

Studies of character also pull back from the confrontation with "as if they were real":

Characters simply cannot be persons in the sense that we commonly know persons in life. It is clear enough that many characters we have read about are more vivid to us than persons we know in daily life, that in a certain sense these fictional persons are more "real" than most actual persons. But to say this conceals more problems than it clarifies. Actual persons are curiously open; they have lives yet to live, they impinge on us in direct ways. We confront them; we can affect them. We see them as coming close to us or receding, and if they recede we may miss them. In these respects, and countless others, real persons have an urgency that the persons of fiction cannot have. (Price, p. 288)

Both just and sensible, such a statement nevertheless opens as many doors as it

⁴Martin Price, in "The Other Self: Thoughts about Character in the Novel," *Imagined Worlds*, eds. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (London: Methuen, 1968), pp. 279-299, provides a lucid, and to my mind, convincing, account of this view, although his intention is to depreciate its significance and to emphasize that "the terms in which character is conceived . . . are governed by the larger purposes of the novel."

⁵See, for example, Norman Holland, *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1975) and David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975). While not wishing to discount the work of psychoanalytic theorists of reader response—which can provide a framework for attending to the special importance of character in certain fictions—I want to point out that there is another level of interaction between reader and character which we tend not to explore or exploit, and that it is one to which our students have ready access.

closes. Characters are not people; even so, characters in fictions are at times equally vivid: they, too, have their peculiar urgency. There is a subversive quality to our response to character which can penetrate the decorum that generally regulates relations between reader and text. At issue here is not only whether, or how, texts provide us with vivid characters, but whether we are to recognize their status as unique and, if we do, how we are to understand the influence of the interaction between reader and character on the full experience of reading a novel.

Given the present critical uneasiness with the constellation of responses to character listed above, it is refreshing and instructive to turn to an occasion early in the history of the novel when the social response to character was indulged on the grand scale. Samuel Richardson and his first readers carried on a vigorous correspondence, touched off by his second novel, in which all the participants accept the notion of the characters' provisional reality. Richardson's readers followed *Clarissa's* history as it appeared and responded "to the moment" in the spirit in which it was written. This correspondence, then, preserves the record of an event which is usually private and transient: the encounter between readers and characters.

I laid down the Book, and felt for some Moments I verily think as much Affliction as such a Friend in real Life so circumstanc'd could feel. Never pretend to say, there is a Pleasure in such a Sorrow. Were the like affecting Scenes really before me, could I take a Pleasure in beholding them? Surely no, then I will Say, they are before me while I read your Description; I see, I hear, I feel the same, and am for the present as unhappy, as if it were all true; but shall indeed much sooner recover from my sorrow, than if I had real Cause for it; for I believe I never should recover, were I in the Situation of most of the Survivors of your Divine Heroine. She, her Friends, and Relations kept me waking Part of the Night; and when I Slept, I dream'd of them, and again Saw their Distress, as my own Imagination represented it, not as a Fiction; I myself was a Person interested in the general Woe: I believe I had the Presumption in my Sleep to fancy myself the Friend of *Clarissa's* Heart.⁶

Susannah Highmore's confession is characteristic of many of the letters. She reports frankly on her unhappiness over the trials *Clarissa* suffers, a dismay so severe on this occasion that it has caused her physical distress. Yet she admits that the history of *Clarissa* which has so strongly affected her is "only a story," to which one obtains entry, if at all, through the mysteries of fancy and dreams. Even so, she has found a way to account for her sense that there is a merging of her own world and that of the novel—she imagines herself "the Friend of *Clarissa's* Heart."

Richardson's readers did more than suffer with his characters. With the encouragement and even, at times, the provocation of Richardson himself, his readers subscribed to the convention that no insurmountable barrier divided their world from that of *Clarissa Harlowe*, or later, of Sir Charles Grandison and the women who commanded his affections, Harriet Byron and the unfortunate Clementina Porretta. In a practice that began in earnest with *Clarissa*, both their reactions and Richardson's concern with how they were reading spilled over the boundaries of the already vast expanse of his fictional domain, into the extensive correspondence he

⁶Susanna Highmore to Richardson, January 2, 1749, Forster Collection XV, ii. f. 12, Victoria and Albert Museum.

came to carry on with his circle of friends and admirers.⁷ Richardson's participation, by soliciting and attempting to direct his readers' responses, makes this an unusual episode in literary history. His readers, however, were first compelled to write to him (and to one another) by their experience of the novels themselves. They were charter members of a great community of readers, a community whose most celebrated citizens are surely those who begged Dickens to spare Little Nell.

Not all readers, similarly moved, take pen in hand. The epistolary novel, especially when employing the device of the author as editor, is particularly inviting to those who wish to enter its world, and Richardson's novels, published serially, allowed his readers to imagine their commentary could actually influence the characters. In addition, Richardson himself was unusually disposed to write letters and eager to discuss his "fictional daughters" and his "good man." Finally, his audience was thoroughly at ease with the art of correspondence. But the blurring of the line between the real and the fictional need not wait on such coincidences. Whether in play or in earnest, it is often done, and Richardson's readers, whatever the complex of motives and opportunities which induced them to write about the characters, are typical of the engaged reader. Thus the continuing colloquy between Richardson and his audience, especially taking place as it does relatively early in the tradition of the novel, provides an account of special significance in the history of readers reading. What did they find themselves doing? How does the text invite such behavior? What role did Richardson play? In what ways is the extratextual encounter of writer and reader with the characters similar to what we do when reading on our own?

On the first appearance of Sir Charles Grandison in his story, Lady Bradshaigh, Richardson's most faithful correspondent, writes: "And so Sir Charles is the man! I make him one of my very best courtesies, and say all the handsome things that ought to be said, upon being introduced to an acquaintance so agreeable. I shall be impatient to know more of him."⁸ John Duncombe, clergyman-scholar, shades easily from questions about Richardson to inquiries about "the situation of our friends at Colebrook," and expresses assurance that Emily and Harriet, both characters in *Grandison*, "will readily forgive me, if at present unmindful of them," because "I indulge the pleasing, but painful reflection, of the wound Clementina so lately gave me, which now, on recollection, bleeds anew" (B, II, 271). When writing about *Grandison* Richardson's readers adopted the lighter tone appropriate to a comedy of manners. The comments on *Clarissa* tell of a more heartfelt experience: "I have been this day weeping over the seventh volume of *Clarissa*, as if I had attended her dying bed, and assisted at her funeral procession," writes Thomas Edwards, at once offer-

⁷The letters responding to *Pamela*, while attesting to the extraordinary reality the characters had for readers, do not begin until after publication (of Part I), whereas with *Clarissa* Richardson received letters from his general audience during the period when Volumes Three through Seven were being prepared for the press. Even more important, with his second novel Richardson solicited and received extensive commentaries from his continually growing circle of friends during the earlier period of composition. With *Sir Charles Grandison* this process became a social event, as the work-in-progress was read aloud to a select group. For a detailed account of Richardson's circle and the history of the correspondence surrounding the novels, see T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

⁸*The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson Selected from the Original MSs.*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (London: Phillips, 1804), VI, 101-102. References to this work will be abbreviated in the text as "B."

ing a graceful compliment to Richardson and admitting to the effect his characters produced even on those who could remember the qualification, "as if" (B, III, 112).

Few ever forgot, of course, that Clarissa's history was a fiction. Unlike the soap opera devotee who reviles the actor-villain met in mufti, Richardson's readers did not invite Clarissa to dinner, nor did they set out in their carriages to offer her a refuge from the toils of her hardhearted family and the endlessly plotting Lovelace. Even more to the point, no one wrote directly to Clarissa, her tart confidante Anna Howe, or the Emily and Harriet of *Sir Charles Grandison*. They wrote to Richardson. His characters were in some sense like the people one knew, yet they were to be addressed, approved, censured and expostulated with through the medium of Samuel Richardson. At one level the entire enterprise was a civilized and delightful game, an arabesque performed by privileged readers on the margins of the text. Yet the letters show these readers pursuing their concerns for Richardson's characters with unstinting energy and devotion. Articulate and well-read, in the main, they nonetheless exempt their warm feelings from some of the controls imposed by interpretive schemas. Although they address Richardson, their remarks take for granted that there is some point in discussing not only what his characters might have done, but what they should do. In addition to pleading for Clarissa's life, they explain in highly charged detail why she can marry Lovelace with no disgrace to herself, even after he has drugged and raped her.⁹

It is certainly possible that we discuss whether or not Will Ladislaw is a suitable mate for Dorothea Brooke, or assess the moral import of Emma's rudeness to Miss Bates, merely because they are lifelike portraits and thereby make such disputes a reasonable speculative activity. The fervor with which these conversations are usually carried on, however, whether between Richardson and his circle, in the classroom, or in the pages of literary journals, derives from the kind of prior immediacy of engagement revealed by Richardson's readers. In the realistic novel, attachment to character becomes a primary motive for critical engagement. Readers avidly dispute whether Dorothea's life is, finally, one of fulfillment or wasteful self-abnegation, and for all the sincere attention Richardson's readers offered to his treasured moral concerns, they share a great deal with those who cannot bear to believe that Rhett Butler will never again warm to Scarlett O'Hara.

They share the experience of the characters as "real." It is difficult to determine just what this means. The mores of readership in the eighteenth (and nineteenth) century did not discourage this assumption as rigorously as do our own. Yet Richardson's novels, of course, possess the same formal structures and patterns which make today's readers reluctant to talk about characters as if they were real. And Richardson himself, though encouraging such conversations, made it clear in the correspondence that his creations were neither so open nor so malleable that their representations could be influenced in any major way by the contributions of his readers. They, however, sustained the conviction that like one's friends, his characters could act on or reject advice, and these readers bridged the distance be-

⁹In a letter to his friend Aaron Hill, Richardson comments with some irritation on the number of letters he received on this subject. See *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 86-88. References to this work will be abbreviated in the text as "C."

tween the fictional and real worlds as easily as any reader who has ever been carried away by a tale, and paused to daydream over it.

The convention which Richardson's readers, busy transforming their musings into an elaborate correspondence, established to give shape to their involvement with Richardson's characters provides a useful metaphor for the encounter of reader and character. The conceit of the "reader as friend" threads through all of their commentaries, connecting the private activity of reading with the public expression of the feelings and views it calls forth. The reader's role has been variously defined: accomplice, collaborator, gossip, fictive self, ideal reader. Each of these identities comes into focus at one time or another, but they are all identities which engage themselves with the persona of the author or with the text as a whole. None accounts for our relation, while reading and after, to something we perceive as more than words but not yet flesh and blood: the character. Richardson's readers bore a number of relations to him as supposed editor, implied author, friend, correspondent, and acknowledged author of *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*. But his readers bore a different relation to the central figures within those texts.

The metaphor they favored for that relation explained and justified their singling out the characters for a persistent attention which has much in common with our behavior towards real people. As the friends of certain characters and the acquaintances of others, they observed and commented on behavior, questioned motives, suffered in sympathy and understanding, and sought to offer advice. Certainly neither Richardson nor his readers did so to the exclusion of all else: their discussions of characters are usually embedded in wider-ranging considerations of the novel's progress, techniques, and didactic import. But they do treat character quite differently from everything else.

More than the example of Anna Howe, *Clarissa's* friend and the reader's analogue, led them to do so. The obvious constraints preventing active engagement with a fictional place (you can't see it; you can't walk about in it), do not apply to fictional persons. Instead, fictions can invite us to behave towards characters in some of the ways we do towards real people. Although you can't touch fictional characters, there are forms of behavior appropriate to real people which may also be called into play with fictional ones. When two people discuss a mutual friend, matching and adjusting explanations of motives and personality, and at length determine, to their own satisfaction, why one person really did such and such a thing, or how another should behave in a trying situation, they are acting very much like Richardson and his readers. There is an even more precise analogy: when one person describes in detail to another someone only the first knows. The "urgency" to the listener of the person thus presented ought to be minimal. There is only the informant's assurance that such a person actually exists. Should the character and tale catch the listener's interest, however, he or she may well experience a range of emotions usually thought suitable only with regard to real people, such as anger on the behalf of someone who is being wronged. The listener may even offer advice and suggest interpretations with considerable eagerness. Is this response to a fiction, or to a "real person"?

The significance of the question is that the listener cannot know. There are numerous correspondences, at certain junctures, between our responses to real and imaginary people. When we read, these correspondences encourage us to become

"friends of the characters." It is the model of the reader, then, rather than that of the character, which requires attention and renovation.¹⁰ The reader's experience of characters as real should be explored rather than discounted as naïve, and the reader as a social entity, recognized as a valid critical construct when the narrative voice is at issue, should be allowed the same privilege with regard to characters.

Richardson's side of the correspondence with his readers can extend our view of the interaction between reader and character. A number of motives led him to the constant prodding and provoking of his readers, and to the great investment of time and energy he made in contending with them. For one thing, he loved approbation. But the pleasure he sought from his readers went beyond the gratifications of interest and admiration. Richardson's own explanation referred to his didactic intentions. Clarissa was to be an example for living, breathing women, not a distant, allegorical ideal. His correspondents would help him to discover where he missed the mark, and he in turn would guide them. To Sarah Chapone he wrote, "Well, Dear Madam, do you observe, that 'I designedly drew Clarissa with some Defects in Judgment, and that even in palpable Cases, in order to give an Air of Probability to the Character'," and, more tellingly, "I had no Apprehension so strong, when I was writing the History of Clarissa, as that I should make her Character too perfect to be natural" (C, 199 and 206). Richardson wrote in part to "repair" the breach in communication between author and reader inherent in the epistolary form, which precludes authorial directives to the audience and limits ironic commentary.¹¹

Richardson's art, however, far surpassed his explanations of it and made his anxieties unnecessary in a way Richardson the moralist could not appreciate. Few readers found Clarissa perfect, though most were devoted to her. The rather minor and mechanical faults Richardson admitted giving Clarissa have much less to do with this than does her deeply undercut situation as a woman more than half in love with her tormentor, and more compromised by necessary subterfuge and self-protective "performance" than she can bear to admit. Yearning for honesty in all she says and does, Clarissa is betrayed by the inescapable paradoxes that bind the secular saint.¹² Her sincerity, perhaps visible to God, can never be adequately demonstrated to the family and friends she longs to convince, and seems suspect to the majority of readers.

But not to Richardson. Like his readers, Richardson gets caught up in the provisional reality of his characters, and in his case Clarissa commands an unqualified devotion. As a result, his account of her in the correspondence is often at odds with the complex figure he created in the novel. In his letters he softens and extenuates

¹⁰In "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (1977), 121-141, Peter Rabinowitz provides an analysis of relations among author, narrator, and various real and hypothetical audiences which may help discriminate among levels of "naïveté" on the part of readers. As Robert DeMaria, Jr. puts it in a recent essay, "Most contemporary readers . . . are neither so impersonal as Culler's nor so real as Holland's." See "The Ideal Reader: A Critical Fiction," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 472.

¹¹To further this effort, in addition to writing private letters, he added footnotes, made a multitude of small changes in successive editions (the most notable of which were those designed to blacken Lovelace's character because of the fondness sentimental readers betrayed for him), and published pamphlets outlining his position on controversial episodes.

¹²In "The Ambassadors: The Man of Imagination Encaged and Provided For," *Studies in the Novel*, 9 (1977), 137-153, I discuss more fully the way in which such radical undercutting affects the reader's view of exemplary characters.

even the very minor flaws he allows himself deliberately to impute to his virtuous heroine. Richardson is also like his readers in expressing his relation to the characters (or, at least, the female characters) through a conceit that makes sense out of just such anomalies. Clarissa, whom he calls "My Girl," "My Divine Girl," and "My Darling Girl," is the treasure of his heart. But they are all his "fictional daughters." And from Pamela on, his spirited and irreverent daughters are all dear to him, so that as Father he is progenitor, admirer, and at times fond advocate. The intensity implied by the familial metaphor notwithstanding, this too is a social response to character. In adopting a paternal role, Richardson assumes duties and obligations which he discharges through the enactment of social patterns of behavior. He opens a dialogue with his readers that permits him to defend Clarissa, and to purport alternately to tease the women in *Grandison* and to ask his correspondents' advice on their behalf. In both cases he relinquishes some of the privileges of the author and takes a place among the other readers of his novels.

On at least one occasion he also explicitly claims to share the experience such readers had of the characters:

You know, Sir, what is required of Writers, who aim at *personating* (in order to describe the more naturally) a particular Character, whether good or bad. For my Part, I must declare, that in my writing of this Scene (by some thought so inflaming) the passion I found strongest in me, whenever I supposed myself a Reader only, and the story real, was *Anger*, or *Indignation*: I had too great an Aversion to the intended Violator of the Honour of a *Clarissa*, to suffer anything but alternate Admiration and Pity of her, and Resentment against him, to take place in my Mind, on the Occasion.¹³

In preparing this defense of the "fire-scene" in *Clarissa* (an episode in which Lovelace arranges for a dead-of-night alarm to help him surprise and seduce his wary captive) against those who found it too suggestive, Richardson sheds the role of author and proposes himself as Ideal Reader.

He is, necessarily, a reader with a difference. The characters are his creatures, forged amidst his fantasies and transmuted by his art. Lovelace and Clarissa are both frequently remarked to have partaken of Richardson's personality, while the rather wooden but admirable Sir Charles Grandison is at least the public man Richardson would have had himself be. Further, Richardson makes use of his functional privilege as author (and printer) to make changes in his texts. His readers, on the other hand, defer to his authority by writing to him, but simultaneously discount it, like all readers, by continuing to debate and prefer their own views. Richardson's own ambivalent relation towards the text and the characters is reflected in the mixture of plaintiveness, exasperation, and imperiousness with which he argues for his interpretations.

As both reader and author, however, Richardson was aware of the power the social response to character has over interpretation. Although with *Grandison* he even went so far as to provoke friendly arguments among his regular correspondents, encouraging the very heterodoxy he struggled to quell when it arose over *Clarissa*, he

¹³"An Answer to the Letter of a Very Reverend and Worthy Gentleman, objecting to the Warmth of a particular scene in the History of Clarissa," in the *Richardsoniana* volume of the Victoria and Albert Museum. This letter was printed and issued as one of Richardson's explanatory pamphlets.

wanted his readers to take his works as he intended them. Critical questions as to which level of intention has priority aside, this wish required, as he knew, that readers like his favored characters. The hard lessons Richardson learned from the mixed reception afforded *Pamela* (whose protagonist was seen by many besides Henry Fielding as a boldly amoral fortune-hunter) took shape as theory in his commentary on *Clarissa*, yielding the many remarks on the need to give his virtuous heroine at least a few minor failings. If she were too good she would be unbearable, as well as unbelievable.

Richardson's recognition that a *Clarissa* could arouse resentment as readily as sympathy in someone absorbed in her history took for granted the quasi-reality his readers accorded his characters. He considered his readers capable of the same hostility towards his paragons as they might feel for any markedly superior creature in their own circle, and he understood that this would affect both perception and interpretation. Commenting on their tendency to overpraise Anna Howe (whom he himself claimed to love in spite of her obvious faults) and to criticize the more admirable *Clarissa*, Richardson speculated: "Can it be, that to the one we know we are superior, and therefore are not Jealous?" (C, 204). Surrounded by readers who assured him of his characters' reality for them and who insisted upon the conviction carried by his "to the moment" writing and the minutiae of daily life he provided in such inspired abundance, Richardson assumed that those who followed his stories would readily compare themselves to his model figures. His didactic intentions required that they do so in the right spirit.

Given the subjective dimensions of each reader's apprehension of any literary work, it is not surprising that Richardson changed few minds on the essentials. His moral purpose was served, however, perhaps better than he understood. He led many readers to consider the subtle shadings of his work more closely, and in the process, they became more aware of the frameworks through which they "read" his figures. Their natural social vocabulary became available to them in new ways, became, in effect, a vocabulary for engaging in the study of literature. At the same time it was honed into a fine-edged tool for moral criticism.

Jane Austen, who shared Richardson's understanding of how important the social response to character is in reading and interpreting, refrained, characteristically, from attempting any such elaborate program to influence her readers outside the confines of the text. But she hoped they would "like" Emma and professed to be unable to see how she would "tolerate" those who might not like Elizabeth Bennet.¹⁴ She herself wrote fondly at the end of *Mansfield Park* of "my Fanny," unintentionally echoing the predecessor whose works she so admired. We may like or dislike the sharp-tongued, meddling Emma, admire or despise the passive but tenacious Fanny Price, but in either case, as the quantity and tone of the criticism written on *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* show, those attitudes will shape the understanding as well as the evaluation readers come to.¹⁵ This, I think, was Jane Austen's point, so sparsely put, just as it was Richardson's, made with his usual prolixity. They liked certain pro-

¹⁴Jane Austen's *Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 297.

¹⁵See Stein Haugom Olsen, "Do you like Emma Woodhouse?," *Critical Quarterly*, 19 (1978), 3-19, who comments on the frequency of such responses, but in order to argue that they are inappropriate.

tagonists, and readers who did not would be unable to share their "reading" of them, or of the text as a whole.

We need not like all characters, but we must feel strongly about those central to a realistic novel if we are to perform as readers. The social response to character, which draws on the deepest levels of personality but also on more conscious, learned modes of perception and assessment, contributes to the shaping of literary interpretations and invests them with much of their vitality. Whether we like or dislike Maggie Verver, to put things rather crudely, but no less truly, helps determine our reading of the notorious ambiguities with which James concludes *The Golden Bowl*. James does seem to allow for both possibilities in this instance. We may read satisfactorily, even brilliantly, whether we are in sympathy with Maggie or not. But is this always the case? Can Isabel Archer's renunciation deeply unsettle the reader who has not been charmed by her? Or, to take the opposite tack, does the reader who is offended by Isabel's immolation of herself lose sight of the fineness of her decision to return to Florence and Osmond? In some instances the social response to character may provide the impetus for a profound devaluation of the work. For those readers who in fact cannot abide Fanny Price, *Mansfield Park* is not the same book that it becomes for those who find her bearable. Some readers, as Friends of the Characters, believe that her author betrays Maggie Tulliver, and others are convinced she punishes Gwendolen Harleth excessively. Their relation with the narrator and with the novels is transformed by their response to the protagonists. It is a response necessarily conditioned by the words on the page, by a figure created within a fictional structure which sets limits on how the reader's predispositions and habitual mode of forming social judgments will be brought to bear. But if the social response to character is so very insistent, perhaps we should retain and even foster our sense of the characters as people, in order to learn how that response disposes our understanding of fictions.

